

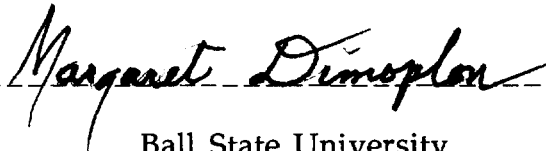
On a Darkling Plain: a Novel

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Margaret Dimoplon", is written over a horizontal dashed line.

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# Abstract

This honors project consists of both the primary text--a novel manuscript--and an introduction in which the author examines the creative process which led to the novel's genesis.

The novel itself is a stylistic collage of genre types, and is an attempt by the author to pay tribute to detective, fantasy, and horror fiction by combining elements of these types of stories into one all-enveloping tale. However, the author has tried to avoid--or subvert--the standard cliches so often encountered in genre fiction, of whatever type.

The novel also examines thematically the nature of human mortality, by following the attempts of a protagonist to understand both living and dying.

# Introduction

I have often fantasized about writing introductions to novels. I am creative, and many creative people are often caught up--happily--within the frills and trappings of their art. I walk down the street and imagine myself speaking with an interviewer. I write acknowledgements while doing the dishes. When I think of long-lost friends, I imagine meeting them again at crowded signing appearances in front of Waldenbooks.

It is a sign of my ego that, in these meetings, my friends are never angry with me for having lost touch. But it is a fantasy, and when in Rome . . .

The same can be said of this novel; it is a fantasy, and should be read as such.

This statement is a redundancy; all novels are fantasies by nature, in that they are lies from the first word to the last. These lies are often based in truth, but fiction writers, I think, tend to be people who are what they are because their minds are given to extrapolation of truth. We think not only about what happens, but what *could* happen. And then we pick up the lie--the fantasy--and run with it for as long as we can.

*On a Darkling Plain* is no exception. Much of what appears in this story has

been taken from life, but I've been running with it for so long that it is no longer remotely recognizable. (This pleases me. In high school--when I first began writing seriously--I would delight in basing short story characters on my friends and acquaintances, and then pointing out to these people which creations they had inspired. A particularly awful habit of mine was to show beautiful girls a story in which *their* character slept with *my* character. That I've given this up is probably for the best.)

But I was prattling about fantasy.

I grew up reading--and imitating in my writings--genre fantasy of all types, simply because this type of fiction appealed most to me. The psychological reasons are many, I suppose--suffice it to say I sought refuge in imagination, like many children before and after me, and the best refuge I could find was in works of the fantastic.

The first book that ever made me cry, for instance, was the last volume of Lloyd Alexander's magical *Prydain Chronicles*; I was in sixth grade when I first read the series, and when I turned the last page, I realized I would never again be privy to the lives of the characters I had come to love as deeply as they loved each other: Taran, and Eilonwy, and Gwydion, and Gurgi, and all the rest whose names--but not faces--I've forgotten. This knowledge broke my heart, as though real people around me had died.

Not a year later I finished Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and suffered from the same ailment--Sam and Frodo were lost to me, living in a Middle Earth

whose borders were only accessible between the covers of their particular tales.

At that time in my life, I would have paid any price to step into their land and find my fortune with them. I have never forgotten that sort of emotion; Middle Earth and Prydain are and always will be associated with yearning in my memory. Naturally, this emotion has affected writing to this very day.

Fantasy led me eventually to the dark and brooding literary offshoot that is horror fiction. There I paid extensive homage to Stephen King--as have countless millions before and after me--and there I learned that fantasy can intrude upon our world, as well as the lands of myth and magic. (I'd gathered this before, when I was five; then I watched Godzilla incessantly, and took great pleasure in imagining him wading through greater Indianapolis. King's books only hammered the lesson home.)

I spent the next few years reading about demons, ghosts, vampires, and awful things of all types. This association led me to sample, among others: Peter Straub (whose *Shadowland* is still one of my favorites), Clive Barker, Bram Stoker, Anne Rice, Robert R. McCammon, Lucius Shepard, Ramsey Campbell, and, finally, H. P. Lovecraft--while in tenth grade, I bought for twenty-five cents a rare Arkham House edition of *The Dunwich Horror and Others*, and spent several blissful summer nights thereafter lost in imaginings of Great Cthulhu, and the terrible, hateful eyes of Pickman's model.

My writings, when they came, followed a similarly dark path. Unsurprisingly, I first practiced capturing the essence of gore and melodrama (the

most obvious trademarks of horror) on the page, rather than those aspects of the good horror story worthy of imitation--the characterization of early King, the poetic imagery of Barker, the thematic content of Stoker's great *Dracula*, and the sheer, out-of-left-field imagination which was Lovecraft's strongest suit. It was not until college that I began to notice such elements taking seed in my own work. Of all of them, theme took the longest to arrive. (I'm still not entirely sure of its care and feeding, but we've begun to coexist without squabbling.)

College, and a degree in English, took me away from genre fantasy for a time, though I did not forget it. However, my time at Ball State has brought me face-to-face with--in addition to what is regarded as great literature--the last of my seminal genres: detective fiction.

It happened during the spring semester of my freshman year, when I took English 230--Advanced Composition--from Dr. Dennis Hoilman. In addition to making our class write during every moment we were not in Robert Bell 291, Dr. Hoilman made sure to provide us with suitable literary fodder for our papers. We spent half the semester reading, dissecting, and writing about James Joyce's "The Dead," and the other half repeating the process with one of Ruth Rendell's Inspector Wexford mysteries: *An Unkindness of Ravens*.

When I think back, I realize that the juxtaposition of these two works has probably done more to guide my recent writings than any event previous. In "The Dead," I found all that makes literature great--theme, poetry, epiphany--and in Rendell's book, I found an absolutely addictive plot combined with deeper meaning.

Hoilman's insistence that we actually analyze the works we'd read made me appreciate the finer technical qualities of writing in general, with these two works operating as spectacular models.

I began to read both classic literature and detective fiction in great quantity. In particular, I found myself devouring Robert B. Parker's Spenser novels; Spenser, for me, defined the use of voice in fiction. (Readers of these novels know--or at least suspect--that Spenser may actually exist separately from his creator. I would listen to him talk even if the subject had nothing to do with his current case. Like they say: If it ain't true, it oughtta be.)

My writing progressed; my short stories grew tighter and more focused.

I attempted novel manuscripts also, but with less success; because the time frame involved in a novel's completion is so long--and I was improving so quickly--I was rarely motivated to finish manuscripts whose plots had been generated, on average, two years earlier, and were necessarily less mature.

I began to think about writing a novel as my creative thesis for the Ball State Honors College. This, I thought, would be an excellent opportunity to require myself to finish a novel manuscript--after all, I would have to if I wanted a good grade out of the experience.

I had several ideas floating in my head at the time, but none seemed absolutely suitable. Then one gelled, as I drove my rickety automobile through the streets of Indianapolis one cold winter's night in 1992.

My thoughts were uneasy that evening. My car was not dependable, and the

very real possibility of a breakdown along the mean streets of Indy inspired all sorts of dark imaginings. I stopped at a red light on 16th Street--where it intersects with Georgetown--and turned to glance at the Motor Speedway to my right. I didn't see it. Rather, I was presented with the sight a man's face pressed against my window, grinning obscenely.

To this day I am glad no cars were driving along Georgetown road that night. I was through the red light and doing sixty-five before my heartbeat and my common sense stabilized.

Immediately thereafter, my Idea Machine kicked to life, purring along far more efficiently than the engine of my Pontiac. For reasons unknown to me, it began using my background in fantasy as fuel.

I began to imagine a dual city--a metropolis where human beings and creatures both fantastic and horrible coexisted. And I began to picture a single man--a hard-boiled character, very detective-like--who could walk equally in both worlds, who was both mundane and magical, who embodied the very essence of this strange divided place I had envisioned.

I called him the Walker of the Line of Shadows. Later, after I read Mark Helprin's *A Winter's Tale*, the name of a restaurant from this story stuck in my head--Moquin's. Somehow, the word attached itself to my character, and he became--irreversably--Mr. Henry Moquin. At about this time I visualized him: a dark man in an overcoat, his hands glowing with magical light.

My idea sprang into being as book-length. In fact, I pictured a chain of



magical, horrifying detective stories, involving Moquin's forays into the hidden world of his dark metropolis, which I had christened Bayport. I also began to picture some of his companions--ghosts, vampires, and shapeshifters.

I realized then that this book would have to be my final say on the genres I'd grown up with. I would throw fantasy, horror, and detective fiction into a pot, just so I could pay homage to all those stories upon which, as a fledgling writer, I had suckled--and loved.

The dangers of revisiting old territory are countless. The mention of the word "vampire" is enough to invoke groans; the bloodsucker has been--pardon the pun--done to death. Ditto the werewolves, and the ghosts, and the creaking stairs, etcetera, which populate so much of horror. Detective fiction, too, continually invokes itself; detective heroes follow strict traditional templates, without much deviation.

I wanted my Moquin to be different. That became my challenge--to create a work that was, at once, a horror story, a detective serial, and a new, unique look at all the cliches that come with those territories.

I wanted to create a truly original fantasy: a lie so fresh as to be revolutionary.

I gained permission to do so for my honors thesis requirements, and convinced Ms. Margaret Dimpolon to be my advisor. And then I began. The odyssey concluded itself today; the result is the fantasy that follows.

My idea changed over the actual creation of text--this has always occurred when I write, regardless of the outlines and notes I generate beforehand. Midway

they tell me I should wipe myself with it.

I am pleased with it, to a point. But when I think of *On A Darkling Plain*, I have the slinking suspicion I've created something that attempts to be more than the sum of its parts--but which, sadly, is nothing more than that jumbled sum. Who knows? In twenty years I'll have the proper perspective with which to see this; for now I can only take what I have to its end. I promised the Honors College a finished manuscript, and this is it. The story may be inconsequential, but I have completed it, and revised it, and treated it as a proper novel is treated; from this point onward it is out of my hands.

Enjoy it, reader, whoever you are. It is a fantasy, and perhaps a juvenile one at that, but the key to fantasy is submission. Accept the lie for what it is, and surrender to it for a time.

You read a fantasy.

And, when in Rome . . .

# Acknowledgements

As much as the creation of a novel must necessarily be a solitary affair, I could not have finished this work without the help of several people. The fact that I have written not only a novel but a thesis project makes this doubly true.

I would like to thank the following for their aid in this endeavor:

Thanks to Michael Taylor and Patrick Kanouse, for constant encouragement, early proofreading, and, inevitably, Steak and Shake. I couldn't ask for two better friends, or two more congenial--and accurate--critics.

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Thanks to my family, for never once telling me I was chasing imaginary butterflies. A son and brother who has chosen a life in the arts cannot be anything but a pain in the ass during his adolescent years; I understand this, and appreciate all the times I know they wanted to say something sensible, but didn't. All my love.

Thanks to Dr. Marjorie Smelstor, who told a scared freshman once that he had what it takes to be a writer. I might not be typing this, were it not for that.

Thanks to Dr. Dennis Hoilman, who introduced me to my first detective

novel. I hope he realizes my current cancer of the credit rating is due in large part to the inordinate amount of money I spend on the genre these days, and that he feels more guilt than I do.

Thanks to Margaret Dimoplon, my thesis advisor and teacher, for being patient and for giving me a chance to flourish. She's now dealt with one of the worst living procrastinators for three semesters; that she hasn't attempted murder or battery is a sign of great character.

Thanks to the Idea Machine, wherever it lives.

And thanks, finally, to that strange guy who peered into my car window one night outside of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. He scared the hell out of me--which was his intent--but he also gave me the seed of this novel.

Damn him, anyway.

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# On a Darkling Plain

A Novel  
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**"To die: to sleep;  
To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;  
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come  
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,  
Must give us pause."**

**--William Shakespeare  
Hamlet  
Act III, i**

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*This story is dedicated to  
Anthony Sak, a man I never met,  
who was killed not far from my house  
one cold winter evening in the  
not-so-distant past.*

*The police have not yet found a reason  
why anyone would want to shoot him  
in the back of the head; we are left to struggle  
with the possibility that no reason exists.*

*I wonder yet what dreams have come for him.*

*I hope they are as sweet as life.*

# Prologue:

## Winter

*Snow falls outside my windows.*

*I stand before the glass, looking at both the timid snowfall and, beyond the immediate flakes, the city itself--Bayport, resplendent and vast, a continent of lights and shadows unreeling into the dark distance. My apartment faces downtown; it is lit only by the innumerable, not-so-distant fragile towers of the city proper.*

*Beneath these skyscrapers, the city's streets are filled with the individual gleams of headlamps, thousands of them. And, though I cannot see them from where I watch, an ocean of pedestrians travels the sidewalks, ebbing and flowing with the passage of hours. It is snowing, and the air is not yet restrictively cold; couples will be out tonight, savoring this weather as romance sprinkled from heaven.*

*Other beings roam the city tonight; I know that all too well. They hide in the shadows, these creatures, and are not easily seen, but I have met too many to discount them. The city is enormous; its streets and shadowed places are far too spacious for mere humanity.*



Whether fantastic or mundane, the snow covers all like a milky gauze, at once concealing and revealing the city's appeal. Beneath it, Bayport's edges are softer, its temperament--usually brassy, demanding, indignant--brought under nature's thumb. In early winter the city is a place of quiet wistfulness.

I find it easy, when watching this barely-contained chaos, to be reminded that I am but a visitor, a foreigner. I moved to this swarming metropolis only recently; before that I knew the American West, and England. Both places were and are beautiful, but neither let me see the vitality that is so apparent here.

Even after seven years, I feel no small sense of ownership--of this view, this city, this life.

Lives are defined by recurring motifs, which arrive and depart by a fickle schedule; like gambler's luck, their only certain characteristic is that, someday, they will return. The when, however, is unknown; different lives operate under different schedules. Sometimes we see the pattern and can predict the coming. Sometimes the pattern eludes us.

Sometimes we simply forget.

My motif is winter.

I was married when I arrived in Bayport.

Her name was Sarah Davenport. I met her in England--in January; she was a Londoner attending Oxford. The story of our attraction and mutual courtship is a

pleasant one, but it is inconsequential here; suffice it to say that we fell in love, wed-- in January, a year after we met, and moved to America to begin married life. I taught--and still teach--at Clairbourne University, south of my apartment. Sarah worked as a manuscript reader for Halwell and Sons, a local publisher.

The city gave us happiness, for a time. We worked and loved with abandon, as the city allowed. We were not so naive as to believe that our life was charmed, but luck had been with us, and we were not about to give up its gifts. And we allowed ourselves, I suppose, to be lulled by the city's balm. The suspect winters of my past were forgotten, or at least so far distant as to be invisible.

But.

Five years ago, in December, Sarah was struck by a car downtown. She was killed immediately.

Gambler's luck. What rewards may also penalize. The wind blows at a different speed. She is gone.

Snow falls.

I grew up in Montana. There, when I was a little boy, I learned I possessed the power of magic.

It is not so hard to read as it is to write. Even now, after twenty-odd years with the gift at my disposal.

The first incident was in winter. The month eludes me; a boy's memory is

— suspect. All I know is that my foster father's property, at the edge of the mountains, was covered with deep, deep snow--so deep, in fact, that I was not allowed to leave the edges of the driveway, where my father had plowed us a path to the main road. I also remember the wind; it blew with fiendish strength.

I remember growing frightfully cold that day. I was playing in the snow at the end of the driveway, alone. My foster brother and father were in town, finding a part with which to fix our television set. My mother was asleep, in her room, and--for she was the one person of our family I found bearable--I'd taken my play outside, so as not to disturb her.

— And so I grew cold, squatting at the edge of a drift, running a yellow Tonka truck up and down a mountain I'd formed from the thick snow. I ignored it for a time, until I started to shiver, and my teeth began to click together erratically, with a sound like a woodpecker's assault on a tree trunk.

I felt warmth in my belly then, so sudden and quick that I wondered if I had, perhaps, wet myself--the time when I had last done so was not far behind me. I ascertained that I had not, and, had it not been for the wondrous comfort of the heat, I would have suspected illness.

Until, of its own volition, it began to spread.

I looked at my arms, and saw them begin to shine, the sleeves of my parka spilling gentle blue radiance. I shrieked, thinking I had somehow caught fire.

My sounds were lost in the wind.

I ran circles in the snow, waving my arms like a bird taking flight, until at last

I realized that I felt no burning. I sat on my rump and stared at myself in wonderment for what may have been hours, turning my hands over, taking off my mittens, examining the very pores of my skin for the secret of the strange illumination it emitted.

I found no answer. And, when my father's truck became audible in the distance, my fire vanished as quickly as it had come, burrowing back inside me, a secret ready-made.

I have not found its source. I have no knowledge of its cause, or why I--as opposed to anyone on this earth--might possess such a gift. I know only that it is mine.

I know that better than anything.

I practiced drawing the heat forth in private. I learned the texture of magic with ridiculous ease; within a week I could turn the power on and off with an eyeblink. I practiced my art in the loft of the barn, away from the prying eyes of my family, amid the deep pillows of hay that had mouldered there for as long as I could remember.

That caused problems, when I found I could turn the heat into actual fire.

I had discovered that the warmth that produced light could be intensified with concentration. On the day of my discovery, I had grown particularly cold; our barn was full of holes, and the wind sidled through them with no difficulty. So I shut my eyes, summoned the warmth in my belly, and urged it to grow.

— It did so, with dizzying speed. And as it did so, it expanded, pushing out at my skin with alarming pressure.

I cast it away from me before I could think. I flung out my arms, and was shocked to see arcs of bluish fire escaping my fingertips and sizzling on the frosty hay.

I sat on my haunches, open-mouthed, until I realized the hay was burning, and busily spreading.

I struggled to my feet and tried to stamp out the flames, but they moved too quickly. And, as they grew, I felt the heat within me respond.

— I stopped, smiling. My eyes closed. I gave a command, and the sensation within me whirled away into nothing--the fire flickering before me vanished, leaving nothing but stray tendrils of smoke in its wake.

I turned then, grinning, knowing the drunkenness of power.

That was when I saw the ghosts, watching me.

I open my hands. I am standing in darkness, before the windows, and my palms are shadowed; I can see their outlines, but nothing more.

I wasn't with Sarah when she died. Rather, I was here in this apartment, working.

I close my eyes and concentrate.

Inside my stomach I feel heat growing. The sensation is not uncomfortable; rather, it is exciting, a feeling of promise. The heat spreads to my groin, and my

heart--speeding it--and from there to my veins and nerves. It fills my lungs as they expand, and spills into my mouth with my saliva.

I open my eyes only when I feel it leave my skin, and surround me. I smile, now, because I am bathed in light of my own creation. I hold up my hand, examining it; now I can see its lines and folds limned in gentle radiance.

I concentrate again, pulling the heat within me. I channel it into my left arm, and from there to my hand--all of it. It moves quickly now--I feel supercharged, thrumming with power. The heat spills into my palm, and I narrow my eyes, bringing more of it from within me.

And a single flame erupts upon my skin, not burning, not spreading; it merely exists, feeding on the searing within my belly.

I have pinpoint control now.

The flame changes, its outlines growing, until I hold before me a perfect globe of blue fire.

I let my hand drop to my side.

The globe floats in the air in front of me, suspended, revolving as though it were the very earth.

I was afraid of the spirits, for a time, until I realized they would do me no harm.

They appeared as translucent, glowing forms the size of human beings--save that their outlines were tenuous, constantly changing and flickering, dimming and

brightening. Their faces were anonymous, but sometimes I could make out features like my own--eyes, noses, lumps that could have been ears.

They came only when I used my magic--particularly the fire. They hovered in the air--one or two at a time--and watched me as I worked. They took no action, nor did they comment upon my doings.

They only watched.

I was young. I became used to them--and why not? If I could accept that I could create fire from nothing, then surely the idea that ghosts might be interested was not too far for logic to jump.

The globe swings around my head, faster and faster. The rooms wheels around me, too, chased by my speeding shadow.

The spirits came to me only when I was alone.

Thus my instant fear, when my foster brother and I walked into the barn one cold, stormy winter afternoon to gather wood, as I saw above us an army of them wheeling near the vaulted roof in a perfect ring.

I stopped, staring at their strange, concerted motion. The mass of them cast sufficient light to cause me to squint against it.

My foster brother--Jessie--glared at me. He stood near the vast woodpile which occupied the left half of the barn. My father spent his autumns cutting it from the forest behind the house; the only sound I can recall from those days is the

— constant whine of his chainsaw drifting in from the grey trees.

"What are you looking at?"

I turned to him, and saw only the same narrow-eyed disgust that was usually evident in my foster father's face. Jessie was fifteen, and growing more like his sire by the hour. He sighed, a cloud of mist growing in front of his lips only to be tattered by an errant breeze.

"Nothing," I said, and cast another glance upward.

The spirits still circled. Shadows--that of our tractor, and a rack of tools, and an empty kerosene tank, and the beams above my head-- swirled around me, dizzyingly.

Jessie glanced at the ceiling, then sighed.

— "Come on," he said. "Grab some wood."

I went to the kindling pile and filled my arms, my mind abuzz with this new development. Fear was giving way to excitement. What was to be next?

I looked up. They moved faster now.

"Move your ass," Jessie said. He stood behind me, carrying an armload of white, broken wood. I gazed at him stupidly, and he lifted a foot to prod me on.

Faster. The shadows were moving quickly enough to flicker, strobe-like. The spirits above were liquid, moving in as seawater in a whirlpool.

Jessie made a noise in his throat.

I heard a distant buzzing, like hundreds of mosquitoes.

I saw my foster brother fall backwards, his feet flying up. The wood also rose,



each piece turning circles in midair--even now I can see it clearly.

Then I saw him lying on the ground, his feet twitching, digging trenches in the mud and straw beneath them. I saw his blonde hair turning red. I saw his head lying at an odd angle against a ragged chunk of concrete. I recognized this even in my horror; my foster father used it too prop the door open on windy days.

Jessie was still, finally.

I began to cry.

The shadows whirled by. The buzzing grew louder.

I looked up and saw the circle of spirits descending now, the entire shape lowering down upon us. The eyes of the spirits were all visible, watching us, watching--

I covered my mouth. The kindling dropped to my booted feet.

Watching Jessie.

They descended, and I ran from the barn into the roaring wind, screaming, until memory burned itself away in blue fire.

In the apartment, above the city, I watch as the globe spins and burns.

I wasn't with her when she died.

I'm growing dizzy.

I wasn't with her--but I know, in my heart, the spirits were.

I dispel my flame. The globe burns away, leaving nothing in its wake but a

band of sizzling yellow across my retinas. I sink to the floor, sitting with my legs spread out in front of me, my palms resting on the wood.

I close my eyes and wait.

At the count of ten, I open them again. I look from side to side, until I see it.

A spirit floats across the room, near my bed. It is a ragged shape, but bright in the gloom. Its eyes are hollow, a dimmer illumination than the rest of it.

We watch each other.

I wonder, as I have countless times before, if this new creature viewing me was once my wife.

I crawl across the floor to it. It hovers; if this action of mine has any effect, I cannot see it. I move within inches of it, and look into the part of its substance that might once have been a face. I strain my eyes, trying to recognize what is left of its humanity.

I do: its brows are hooded, its nose too thick. I think it was once a man.

I drop my eyes. When I raise them again, it is gone. I'm alone again in the dark.

I lie there for a while, panting. Then I turn onto my side and regard the city through the cold windowglass.

The snow is coming down harder. The wind seems to have picked up--the snow swirls before it, sometimes falling vertically, sometimes blowing directly towards me.

Luck is fickle. I watch the wind and try to find a pattern. Sometimes, in its

*curves, I see the circling of spirits. Sometimes, in its howls, I imagine screeching tires.*

*I think of motifs. I think of the wonders--both horrific and beautiful--I have seen in this place, this city. I think of my wife.*

*I watch the city swallowed by winter, dreading this new season.*

## **Part One:**

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# **The Eternal Footman**

**'I am no prophet--and here's no great matter;  
I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,  
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,  
And in short, I was afraid.'**

**--T.S. Eliot  
"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"**

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# Chapter One

The broad man behind the equally broad glass desktop rose when his secretary ushered me into the room. He smiled, and his expression was so wide and lupine that I thought for a moment the top of his skull might topple off, and I'd be left to do business with a headless corpse.

"Henry Moquin," he said. His voice was rich and deep and measured out in precise tones, as carefully prepared as a gourmet meal at Josephine's downtown: a lawyer's voice.

"Correct," I said. "And you must be Rupert Fisk." I allowed myself a slight smile. "Attorney at law."

He moved ungracefully from behind the desk and came forward to shake my hand. His grip was strong, even though his hand was large and flabby. I wondered if perhaps it might swallow my palm whole.

"Have a seat," he said, indicating one of the two leather-covered armchairs in front of the desk. I did so, leaning back and making myself comfortable. The chairs were soft; I resisted an impulse to close my eyes and drift off.

Instead, I gazed around the office while Fisk managed to fit himself back into

his chair. If I'd had any doubts about his income, the decor put me at ease. His office was a masterpiece of high-tech modernism; everything I couldn't see through was a grey or black piece of machinery whose exterior was dotted with blinking red and green lights, or a digital readout. To my right, a fax machine rested next to a stereo system on a long glass table; it hummed and slowly produced a curling sheet of paper, even as a stereo beside it played Vivaldi at low volume. Above it, a not-bad abstract painting hung in a brass frame upon a wall colored eggshell-white. The carpeting beneath my feet was deep white pile. Another painting and a series of white file cabinets took up space along the wall opposite the stereo.

All of this was illuminated by sunlight; behind Fisk was a wall-sized window looking out over the city and the Lake beyond. Through it, Bayport gleamed as though every building, however old, had been polished. Fisk probably liked to turn around in his swivel chair and imagine he owned the whole damned thing. And the water, too.

"Nice view," I said, as he folded his hands in front of him.

"Best feature of the office," he said, as though he were trying to sell it to me. "I've been here five years, and I never get tired of it."

I nodded and examined Fisk. Fifty, maybe fifty-five. He was big, but not necessarily fat; his grip had been strong enough to make me think he lifted weights. Ex-football player, maybe, or a wrestler. He still had most of his hair. His forehead kept going and going, but the sides of his head were covered by neatly trimmed salt and pepper. His eyes were wide and not squinty, but they were hard and appraising,

as I like to imagine mine might be. His lips were thin; he smiled now, but I imagined he could produce a grimace strong enough to frighten either judge or jury. Good teeth behind the lips.

Fisk took care of himself. It followed. I rarely see men as ambitious who've let their bodies fall to seed.

"So," I said. "What can I do for you? I have a class at noon."

Fisk chuckled to himself, then took a single sheet of paper from a manila folder on the desk before him. The folder was the only object on the desktop, aside from a black metal pen and a framed photograph of a young, smiling girl, maybe twelve or thirteen. Not a girlfriend, I hoped.

"You're a puzzle, Moquin," Fisk said, and straightened the sheet of paper before him. "Most men leave a drawerful of paper behind them. All I could compile on you is this." He tapped the sheet with a thick finger. The nail was manicured.

"Mm," I said.

He read the sheet out loud, holding it away from him and squinting down his nose.

"Birth date: unknown. Place of birth: unknown. Age approximately thirty-five to forty." Fisk looked up and gazed coolly at me. "But I'd say younger, maybe thirty-two." His eyes returned to the page. "Foster home in Montana, graduated from high school with honors and a letter in track. Bachelor's degree at University of Wyoming, English and history. Masters and doctorate at Michigan. In English.

Lived in England for two, maybe three years, worked at a finishing academy of some type or another, teaching the youth of Britannia. There you met your wife, Sarah Dominick. Married in London, came back here, and set up residence in Bayport. You've worked for the past six years at Clairbourne U., teaching lit and comp to undergraduates. Your wife was killed five years ago in a car accident downtown. Only her family came to the funeral." Fisk turned over the sheet and drummed his fingers on the back of it. "That all about right?"

"Mm," I said. But not as cheerily as before. Fisk had done his homework as well as anybody could.

"And, based on experience, I'd say you're fairly uncommunicative. For a Clairbourne professor."

"We're notoriously boring," I said. "I'm trying to reform, but if I talked about *Paradise Lost* you'd fall asleep." I smiled and steeped my fingers under my chin. "What do you want, Fisk?"

He smiled--humorlessly--then leaned back in his chair. "I need you to find someone."

"Who says I find people?"

"I'm not at liberty to say."

"I teach English. I don't find people. You want Raymond Chandler or Spenser or Sam Spade or Fletch. Or that Holmes guy. He's good."

"You find people," Fisk said. "And you find stolen goods, and you find documents, and you find lost cats if you're paid. Not regularly, but you do it. If you



have to know, I was referred to you by Jimmy Delane at the art gallery downtown. You got him out of some trouble a couple of years back."

"I wish I hadn't," I said. Delane was Mafia, which was bad enough. He'd also seen more of my methodology than I would have wished--and he'd talked to Fisk. I frowned.

"He's awfully glad you did."

I said nothing.

"Look," Fisk said. "I've heard you're very good at investigative work. I've also heard that you're good because you have access to . . . certain abilities . . . that policemen and detectives don't have. I've tried a P.I. already, and he turned up nothing. I want to hire the best."

I sized him up. Delane had definitely talked too much. But Fisk seemed legitimate, regardless. Behind the polish I could see a certain eagerness--perhaps even desperation--that fathered honesty.

"I charge a flat rate," I said. "It's high."

"I know. I have money."

"Good." We discussed fees, and he agreed to my figures without so much as a token haggle.

"I tried to wire it to your bank account already," Fisk said. "But you don't have one."

I smiled. "Cash only."

"How do I know you won't skip on me?"

"Did I skip on Delane?"

"No."

"Then I won't skip on you."

We stared at each other, each smiling a little. I tried to look predatory, like an attorney.

"I want you to find my daughter," Fisk said. "Amelia."

"The one in the picture?" I asked.

"Yes. It's old, though--she's nineteen now, looks like a model. This was the last time I could get her to pose for a picture."

I reached forward and turned the photo around more fully. I stared at the face, trying to imagine how it looked now. Nineteen. Faces change quite a bit between twelve and nineteen. Very difficult--but not impossible.

"No current photos at all?"

"Two."

Fisk's fingers extricated two enlarged photographs from the folder and passed them across the desk to me. The first was in black and white. It showed a group of young men and women dancing at a club, probably somewhere on the North Shore. A face had been circled in permanent marker. I stared, trying to absorb it.

Amelia Fisk now had longer hair; it had also changed color, apparently. The girl in the framed photo on the desk had short red hair, and the elder Amelia seemed blonde--though her hair may have been white. The photo was vague and blurred. It had probably been taken by a reporter at the *Herald* for the Lifestyle

pages. Fisk had clipped it and then enlarged it. I could get the original through the paper's archives.

I pushed the photo aside and looked at the second shot. This one was much more distinct; it was a mug shot.

Amelia--her hair now a lank and dirty brown--stood in front of a pale blue background. A number shone from a digital readout held beneath her chin. A date was printed across the bottom corner of the photo: May twelfth. Seven months before.

"What was she arrested for?"

"Possession of marijuana," Fisk said, his face and voice neutral. "I got her off. It was the last time we spoke. She was enraged that I had to come to her aid. She stormed out of the house after the trial--"

"Which was?"

"June fourth. She stormed out and drove away. I haven't seen her since."

"Friends?"

"A whole pack of them," Fisk said, sighing. "All of them know absolutely nothing. They roam up and down the Shore; they're part of the night scene there. Amelia had a place of her own on Twelfth and Hurlbut--she shared it with about nine different people."

"Boyfriend?"

"No one she mentioned. I know she went out, had dates, that sort of thing." He set his mouth. That sort of thing. I was getting a better picture of both of them.

"How about the drugs? Anything heavier than pot?"

"Cocaine, once or twice."

"How do you know? Did she tell you?"

"No," he said, and he confirmed my suspicions with the single word.

"You had her followed?" I asked.

"Yes. After the arrest, I hired an investigator. Granby--know him?"

"No." No wonder the woman had jumped ship. Any properly self-righteous nineteen-year-old would flee a private detective hired by her own father. My respect for Amelia, wherever she was, went up a notch.

"You disapprove?" Fisk asked, his eyes resting steadily upon mine. There was an argument there if I wanted it.

"Not my job," I told him. I smiled, not too convincingly. "I'll need the names of any and all of her friends on the Shore. I'll also need the address of her apartment, her car, her bank account number, credit information, that sort of thing."

His eyes narrowed. "You . . . use all that?"

"You expect me to pluck it out of the air? Of course I'll need it." He looked surprised, and I began to see what his reservations were. Apparently, that was precisely what he expected.

"I'd heard . . ." he began, and then stopped. "Perhaps Jimmy was wrong."

I sat back and regarded him. My face offered him nothing--I hoped. Safer that way.

His cheeks reddened. "Forgive me, Moquin," he said, haltingly. "But I'd

heard that . . . that you have access . . . to . . ."

I find the word is hard for a grown man to say.

"Magic," he said, finally. His voice had lost its lawyerly strength.

"I've heard that too." I said.

Fisk looked up at me, hopefully. "So why do you need--?"

"I didn't say it was true."

"But Jimmy said--"

"Jimmy is a thief and a murderer. He always lies about something, Fisk. It's a part of his character."

He closed his mouth and nodded.

"I'm good at what I do," I told him. "Maybe to Delane it seems like magic--I don't know. But I'll find Amelia for you, no problem. I won't use anything but my brain. And if that disappoints you, then I can walk away and you can get someone else." I smiled. "But I'll do a better job."

He frowned. A light had fled from his eyes, and I began to measure his desperation. He had been willing to believe Delane. That told me volumes about Rupert Fisk, and whatever existed between him and his daughter.

"All right," he said.

"I'll require the information soon," I said. If you wish, you may fax it to my home. I'll begin as soon as I receive it. And the cash, of course." I smiled sunnily.

Fisk nodded. "I can have it for you tomorrow morning," he said. Sweat had broken out on his forehead.

"Shall I drop by?"

"If you'd like."

"Well then," I said. "I believe we have a deal, Fisk." I stood and offered my hand across the desk. He stared at it, perhaps looking for truth--or the secret of magic--in its lines and folds. Then he shook it.

His grip was a little weaker. Disappointed? Defeated?

I smiled thinly and showed myself out.

In the elevator, alone, I opened my hands, and shut them again. Delane had seen too much. I thought absently about taking care of him--this wasn't the first time someone had come to me with Jimmy's information--but it wasn't my style. I'd never killed anybody, and I didn't know that I could. Besides, what damage could it do? No one in any power would believe him.

Still, the constant denial was getting to be a pain in the ass.

I allowed a tongue of flame to grow in my palm, at an intersection of pink grooves in the flesh. I swayed with the elevator's descent; weird shadows swelled and ebbed above my head, all grotesque silhouettes of me.

I frowned and closed my fist, snuffing the flame. The doors opened, and I strode into the lobby of Jacoby, Fisk, and Maltham, thinking that what Fisk didn't know couldn't hurt him, and hoping I was right.

## Chapter Two

Paul was waiting for me when I arrived home.

My night class had run late--my students, normally sullen, had for some unexplicable reason taken to the discussion of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* for over an hour and fifteen minutes. I emerged from the class with no small sense of triumph, as well as vast relief. A few of them knew more than I did.

Paul met me at the sidewalk outside of my door. He stood with his arms crossed and his lean head tilted forward so that his chin touched his chest; had I not known better, I would have assumed he was dozing.

But Paul was of the Brotherhood. They don't doze. He'd probably been listening to my stomach gurgle for blocks.

I walked up to him. "Good evening," I said.

"Yes," Paul said, lifting his head. His expression--such as it was--held no emotion, muscles as slack as a Halloween mask. His skin was warm and a ruddy pink, though; he'd managed to feed. A good evening, indeed.

"We need to talk," he said.

"Sure," I said. "Come on up."

I withdrew my keyring from my side pocket and with it unlocked the sliding metal gate that guarded the stairway up to my floor.

I had managed to obtain the entire building from a client some years before; the structure had once been a warehouse owned by Callahan and Sons, a textile company that had peaked back in the early forties. By the sixties the company had folded, and when I picked up the building it had been long abandoned. But I owned it free and clear, and so eventually I moved into the office space on the top floor. Turned out this office area had an unbroken stretch of windows looking out over downtown and the Canal. I did a little work, and before long I had the most spacious apartment on the north side of Bayport, with one of the best views of the city.

I ushered Paul up the stairs and, at the top, unlocked what had once been a service door. It opened smoothly, and I flipped on the lights inside.

My apartment had no walls; I'd taken out all of the original, rotted partitions and had never gotten around to replacing them. The result was a huge expanse of open space broken up by support pillars, standing partitions, and hanging curtains. My kitchen occupied one corner of the room, and was set off from the rest of the place by a formica island. One corner had been designated as my library/study; there I had placed my books, my desk, and my computer. My bedroom--such as it was--took up a small amount of space near the entrance, and the rest of the room had been granted the optimistic title of "living space." I had a TV and a couch in front of



it. Sometimes I would work on the place during the weekend, trying to fix it up; other times--most times--I sat in front of the tube eating microwave burritos and thinking about the renovations with all of my might.

Paul followed me in, and then immediately walked to the expanse of windows. I had replaced the originals with huge, thick single panes that stretched from floor to ceiling. He stood with his hands clasped behind his back, watching the city move in front of him.

I walked across the apartment to the kitchen and began to fix myself dinner. Paul had something to say, and he would tell me when he was good and ready.

He stared out, as still as the statue of William Clairbourne in the campus quadrangle, and I watched him as I heated up a half-pot of leftover chili. I hadn't seen Paul for three months, since he'd left the Brotherhood and had come to me for help. He seemed older--but much more healthy. When we'd last met, he'd carried with him a certain pallor that I've learned to associate with those who know they are doomed. Now he at least seemed alive--by one definition or another.

Paul was a plain-looking man; his face was too tight and thin to be considered handsome, I suppose, though his eyes were clear and held a certain intensity that I had observed was appealing to some. His hair was long and brown and fell haphazardly over one side of his face. Something in his features always struck me as vaguely African; perhaps one of his parents had been black. Hard to tell. And he seemed relatively young--in terms of appearance, at least, he looked about twenty-two.

He never blinked. His head sometimes pivoted slightly, but the movement was so smooth it seemed mechanical, like the robotic whirrings of a Disneyland automaton.

The apartment was warm, so I changed out of my dress shirt and tie and into a thin, billowing black T-shirt and sweats. Then I ate. Paul never moved from his post at the window.

I was half-finished when he finally moved to the island--which served as my table--and sat across from me.

"I have some news," he said, in a low voice.

I nodded. His eyes followed my spoon from the chili to my mouth and back again.

"Want some?" I asked, with a half-smile.

He regarded me for a moment, and then raised his eyebrow. He made a grunting noise in his throat, and he brushed the hair from his face.

"It's the right color," he said, "But it's a little thick."

I chuckled, and then decided to draw him a little more, to get him talkative.

"You fed tonight," I said, around a mouthful of food.

"Mm. A vagrant was generous."

Tonight was a good night. Some, though, were bad; when I'd first seen Paul he'd been shaking like a bereft junkie. It was a sight both terrifying and pathetic. I'd offered him my own blood, but he never took it--for that I was secretly glad.

He nodded to himself, and then spoke in a low voice.

"A Darkling has arrived," he told me.

I put down my spoon and stared at him. "A new one?"

"Yes. I believe so."

"Not Verene?" It was a silly question. If he told me he believed so, then he knew so; I was only clutching at straws.

Besides, Verene was bad enough.

"A new one," Paul said. "It has killed twice in the past week. The first was a child on the south side, in the tenements. The other was a member of the Brotherhood."

I stared at him.

"How?" I asked.

"Bled," he replied, and grimaced.

"How'd you find out?"

"We do not die easy. I . . . perceived . . . her passing."

The nosferatu in the Brotherhood were tough and unyielding and relentless. I guessed--from what I'd seen of them--I could hold my own with one of them in close quarters. Maybe two, but even that was conjecture, depending upon how susceptible to my magic they were. Any more than that, and they could have bled me dry without breaking the proverbial sweat.

"Why one of the Brotherhood?" I asked.

"I don't know. Perhaps they knew of its arrival, and had gone to investigate. Perhaps it was merely coincidence. Or . . . " Paul licked his lips. "Or perhaps the

Darkling is trying to establish territory here."

"I've never known one to do that," I said.

"You only know Verene. She's half-mad--not at all representative of her breed." He ran his fingers through his hair. "The others are savage, but they have methods, practices. They are not unlike the Brotherhood in that regard."

I thought about reminding him that at least the nosferatu had once been human, but I didn't want to stir up any bad memories.

Paul stood.

"I have to go," he said. "I'll try to find out more. But I thought I would warn you."

"Warn me?" I asked, looking up at him. I pushed my glasses up to the bridge of my nose with my index finger. "Why?"

"Because if it can kill a Brother it can kill you," Paul told me. He frowned. "And if it wants to stake out a claim to Bayport, then it might just seek you out. You're a beacon, Henry. We of the shadows are drawn to you." He smiled. "I found you that way."

I thought about the first time I'd seen Paul; I remembered him slumped in my doorway, as pale as a drift of snow, trembling and cringing away from my touch, as though he had suffered electric shock. The Brotherhood had tried to slay him as a traitor, and he'd bolted. He found me without ever knowing me, and had never told me how.

"I can't say I'm glad to know that," I murmured, and looked at my hands.

"I will watch out for you," he said.

"Thank you, Paul."

He nodded, and then walked to the door, his movements economical and precise. He made absolutely no sound, even though he wore boots, and my floors are polished hardwood. He shut the door behind him and was gone. I permitted myself a little sadness on his behalf; his loneliness was catching.

I grunted to myself as he left. I had a job to do out amidst the city, and now a Darkling would be stalking it with me. Just wonderful.

I swallowed and went back to my meal. It had grown cold.

I finished my chili, half-heartedly cleaned up my dishes, and walked across the room to my double bed in the corner I had designated as my private chambers. I stripped down to my underwear and rubbed my bare biceps. I considered exercising, but I wasn't in the mood. A long rectangular mirror hung on the wall on the other side of the room. I looked at myself in it. My stomach was still flat; I could see the muscle underneath my skin was still firmly defined. I was in shape, at least for another day. Pale, though. I needed sun.

I rubbed my arms. Looked into my eyes. Took a few steps closer to the mirror.

They were the same color as always--blue, deep, and even. Set in the same long face. I frowned at myself.

I was still alive; still there. Still made of flesh and blood. No safes had fallen from on high to crush me as I walked from class to downtown to home. No

muggers had shot me. No cars had jumped off the street to crush me to pulp.

Still alive.

I wondered what it was like to be Paul, to wake every morning--or evening, rather--with the knowledge that one is eternal, that one, with proper care, will always *be*, will always face sleep and never death. I wondered what it was like to see each sunset as one of a string, a line of sunsets leading to a vanishing point on the horizon, and beyond.

I tried to imagine that and could not.

That led me to think about the spirits. And what they faced, what world they woke and slept within, what wonders their eyes saw.

I climbed into the double bed there and let my arm fall across the empty space that had once contained the warm slumbering form of my wife. After the accident the sheets had smelled of her perfume, for a time. I slept on the couch then, when I slept at all. Now the sheets were washed, and I lay stiff and prone atop them. I curled into myself. I touched the empty sheets. I wished for her. I tightened my lips and thought of the spirits that sometimes watched me and begged for one of them to be her, come at last to see me, to tell me I was loved.

She didn't come.

I closed my eyes.

And soon enough I slept and woke again, and stumbled into the new day mulling over the same knowledge: the sun was up, I was lonely, and I stood one tick closer to my eventual, incomprehensible end.

## Chapter Three

In the morning I dressed in my teaching uniform--black slacks, white shirt, black tie, polished shoes, charcoal grey sportcoat--and went about my business.

I had classes at ten, noon, and three. I took the extra time in the morning to fire up my car--a black LeBaron I'd just bought--and drive downtown to Fisk's building. There he handed me an envelope half full of cash. I counted the bills, wondered again if I charged a bit too much, and then thought of all the pretty things --like auto insurance payments--I could buy with the money.

I accepted and shook his hand with a smile.

Fisk said he would fax me the information I needed that afternoon, and I told him I'd start looking for his daughter that very evening.

I drove the long way uptown to Clairbourne University, listening to the Doors on cassette and hugging the shore of the Lake as well as I could. Jim Morrison seemed to understand my mood, and we both sang about it for a while, until I began to feel better. I wished it was warm enough to put the top down--even though the

sky was cloudless, December had announced its presence with a twenty degree morning and a brisk wind from the water.

No Darklings leaped from the sidewalks to attack me in my car. By the time I reached campus I was positively cheerful.

Clairbourne was full of activity and swarming students by the time I arrived. I swung the LeBaron into the faculty garage on the north end of campus and walked the rest of the way to the DuPrey building amidst crowds of grim-faced students. The first exceptionally cold day is always a shock to them--I saw several rueful souls hurrying to class in shorts and sandals, and I did my very best not to laugh at them. Such behavior would be unseemly in a professor.

The Clairbourne campus was and still is more functional than aesthetic, though it has its beauty marks. The fountain in the middle of the quadrangle, which my office faces, is one of them, as is the arborium at the south end of campus, against the lakeshore--as far as I know, that narrow patch of forest is the only place in Bayport where one can walk right up to the Lake's edge on sand, rather than a three or four-foot high concrete abutment which drops to dirty water. Canterbury Hall, where most of the history classes are taught, is a wonderfully old and crumbling brick building, and inside is hidden a branch of the main library that exists as libraries should--in perpetual shadow and with tiled, echoing floors and dark wooden shelves.

Unfortunately, my office was in DuPrey, which seems to have been designed to resemble nothing more than a discarded refrigerator box made out of grey brick.



It was built in the middle seventies, and all of the interior rooms are still painted in the various favorite hues of 1974--dark olive green, burnt orange, dingy yellow, sky blue, and brown. All of it is lit by fluorescent lights just bright enough to cause a headache.

I taught four classes on the second floor of DuPrey, and my office was on the third. Correspondingly, I grew quite tired of the place over the course of a few hours; I spent as little time there as I could.

I walked up to my office with an hour to spare before my first class. One of its walls was painted white, and the other was the aforementioned defecatory brown. As I understood it, one had to possess tenure before a request for new paint was upheld by the administration, so I had out of desperation erected shelves over much of the brown wall, and then had filled them with as many books as I could lay hands upon. The illusion worked, so long as I didn't have to look at it too closely.

Aside from the shelves, my office contained a desk too low to the ground for my knees, a radiator, and a personal computer and printer, courtesy of the university.

I tried to review Emily Dickinson before my ten o'clock American Lit class and made no progress. Once Emily, always Emily. I gave up after ten minutes and proceeded to draw pictures on the computer.

Someone knocked on my door. I opened it and found Deborah Jackson standing in the corridor, grinning. I smiled.

"Dr. Jackson," I said. "Won't you come in."

"Morning," she said, brightly. She touched my shoulder as she entered. "I tried to call you last night, but you weren't in."

"I was there," I told her, "I must have been asleep."

"At nine o'clock?"

I shrugged.

"Oh," she said, looking concerned, and immediately I felt bad. Deborah knew about Sarah, and she automatically--and usually rightly--assumed that most of my problems stemmed from her absence. "Are you all right?" she asked.

"My heart is still beating," I told her. I looked up at her face. Deborah was beautiful. Her face was rounded but not full, and was graced by wide green eyes that I could imagine looking at me even if her face was turned away. She had short, straight brown hair that fell to the level of her chin. A good body; not too slender, not too wide. Today she'd placed that body inside a bright orange sweater and a pair of black stretch pants. Thick orange socks erupted out of the faded Nikes on her feet. The students liked Deborah because of the way she dressed. I liked Deborah for a great many more reasons.

She smiled sadly, and even though I had to admit she was my best friend I wanted for a moment to snap at her. I clamped down on the impulse. I had wanted her to pity me, and then I had hated her when she did. I was a joy to be around, sometimes.

She pulled a chair away from the wall and sat on it, crossing her legs. "I had tickets to *Twelfth Night*. I had to go by myself."

"Sorry," I said, and smiled. "I would have gone with you if I'd known."

She smiled back. We sat there in silence and smiled at each other happily. Friends. We belonged on a *Peanuts* poster. Linus and his damned security blanket.

Deborah deserved better.

I remembered with a certain sadness a night two months before, when Deborah had eaten dinner at my apartment. I cooked for us: nothing more complex than cajun chicken, but I've always been a little clumsy in the kitchen. We ate and laughed and I thought about Sarah the whole damn time. I drank too much beer. We watched Kenneth Branagh in *Henry V* on videocassette. We threw popcorn at each other like little children. I had a wonderful time and hated myself for it. It was like being married again.

Later in the evening she massaged my shoulders. She ended up embracing me. I remembered feeling her lips moving on the back of my neck as she held me. I remembered feeling something akin to panic, and making some sort of senseless excuse to get her out of my apartment.

Deborah deserved better.

Sitting there in my office, I wondered for the hundredth time if she might really have fallen in love with me.

She spoke again: "A man came around my office the other day and asked me some questions about you."

I looked up from my twined fingers and regarded her. "Who?"

"A lawyer. Named Fisk."

I nodded. "I'm doing some work for him."

Deborah knew nothing about me. She thought I was merely an associate professor of English who sometimes wrote and published morose poetry, and who could sometimes cook, and who sometimes played the Doors while his students took multiple-choice departmentalized ScanTron tests over Ben Franklin's *Autobiography*. She didn't know what I did in my spare time.

I wondered how she would feel about me if she knew, if I could tell her the truth about myself. I hadn't even told Sarah; she'd discovered me holding a palmful of light late at night, as I stumbled through her flat in London looking for the bathroom. Sarah had accepted me. Could anyone else?

I couldn't formulate an answer. There might not have been one.

"What kind of work?" she asked.

"I'm really Spider-Man," I told her. "Fisk knows my secret identity, and he's blackmailing me. I'm performing evil acts because he has super strength and is holding Mary Jane hostage." I smiled beatifically.

"Really."

"Really," I lied, "He's a friend of my cousin Harold. Fisk needs me to cowrite a book on legal policy with him. He's a pretentious ass, and he wanted to know more about me before he gave me the job."

"Oh."

"No intrigue," I told her. "No secret identity. Sorry."

"I'm disappointed," she said, and gave me a smile so sad and and so caring

that I thought my lip would quiver if I looked at her for long.

I hadn't voluntarily touched her since that night.

I thought about reaching across the space between us and touching the back of her hand and saying, *Deborah, you're a good friend. I care for you, and I appreciate what you've done for me.* I thought that maybe it might heal the memory we shared, or perhaps even break new ground in a relationship I liked very much.

But I didn't do that. It would have been courageous.

"Hey," I said, pointing at the open Norton anthology on my desk. "I have to brush up on my Dickinson. Can we do lunch?"

Her smile faded. *Bastard*, I told myself.

"Sure," she said. "Of course." She licked her lips and then looked at her lap. "I thought that if you wanted, we could go to see Harry Connick next week. I bought the concert series tickets--I have two."

I smiled. "Absolutely," I said, wondering who in the hell Harry Connick was. Maybe he would play "Riders on the Storm." Maybe the Beatles would reunite.

Deborah smiled at me.

"I'll see you for lunch," she said. She stood and left the office, pausing to wave at me from the door. I waved back, my mouth stuck in a goofy smile.

"Bye," I said, made eloquent by emotion.

Deborah deserved better.

She left the office, closing the door behind her. I watched the door for a while, wondering idly if it would open again, admitting her, so I could open my

mouth and try to speak to her again. So I could say what I needed to say; what she deserved to hear.

It didn't open.

I sat in silence, mulling over the chaos that was my thoughts. Eventually I stood and went to class. I stumbled through my lecture. Halfway through, a group of four kids stood up and filed out, giggling under their breaths.

No one ever did that to Deborah; of that I was certain.

But I deserved no better.

## Chapter Four

Nightfall arrived and brought with it biting cold.

The weatherman on Channel Two claimed the night hours would be cold enough for freezing rain; motorists such as myself were advised to be careful on the city streets--or better yet, just to stay home. I weighed their advice carefully while I changed into my more casual Hey-I'm-A-Detective clothes: baggy black pants, a black long-sleeved shirt, a pair of brand spanking new Nike Air hightops in grey, and a dark overcoat.

I slicked my hair back and put in my contact lenses--I didn't want any moisture to gather on my glasses should I be out in the elements. I checked myself in the mirror. Good. I looked like a proper gumshoe. I would stand out in one of the North Shore clubs, but I could live with that.

The North Shore begins just south of the Clairbourne campus, and serves its students almost entirely; in recent days, though, the artists and gypsies and eccentrics and freaks from South High have been migrating up to join in the frolic as well. The Shore is centered along Persimmon Avenue, which runs out of

Clairbourne University next to the lakeshore. Along a five or six block stretch, the casual partygoer can find perhaps twenty-five dance clubs and bars, all of decent quality, and all trying to outdo one another in terms of lighting, cutting edge dance music, and even the illicit substances I'm sure are sold out of the back rooms. The university has a student population of somewhere around forty thousand, most of whom are of age; even the weaker clubs thrive on their patronage.

According to the sheet Fisk had given me, Amelia lived in and frequented this part of town. I started the investigation with that. I had already checked to see if she had ever been enrolled at the University, though I doubted the possibility. Fisk would have mentioned it.

I was correct. Amelia had attended the Irwin Mitchell School of Art downtown for two years. Her grades there were adequate--C's mostly, though the one professor I'd been able to corral on the phone who could remember her categorized her as a possible talent lacking in drive. *Drugs*, he said, almost in a conspiratorial tone. *All of them are on drugs these days. Saps the will.*

I assured him this was so and went on to bigger snooping.

Fisk's information sheet contained no names of friends--he couldn't remember any of them at all. But he was kind enough to mention that she had sometimes frequented a place called the Glass Slipper at Persimmon and Fife. He'd also given me her last known address--that of a house only a few blocks east of the Shore Zone. A handwritten line scrawled across the bottom of the page told me his PI had gone by there and turned up nothing. Typical. I'd have to hit the house, too.



I flipped a coin--heads, I'd start with the club, tails, I'd start with the house.

Tails.

I drove down to Clairbourne and parked for free, and then walked south through campus into the Shore zone. The weather was indeed bad; I walked with my hands shoved into my overcoat pockets and my collar turned up, but before I'd gone two blocks my cheeks had reddened and my lips were cold. Tiny droplets of rain or ice misted in from the direction of the Lake with every strong breeze. Bayport in winter: nice place to visit, but I wouldn't want to visit there.

The cold hadn't kept away the crowds from the Shore. A block south of campus they picked up in earnest. It was only seven by the time I reached the Shore zone, and before I had walked a block I passed two groups of college-aged kids who, if not drunk, were well on their way to that hallowed state. They huddled together, their cheeks flaming red and their eyes hazy and squinted against the chill breeze.

I passed a dozen clubs with a steady flow of clients leaving and entering their doors. One of my former students coming out of a place called Dino's Nest shouted incoherently and waved a mittened hand. I nodded back to her and hurried on my way before she could talk to me. I couldn't remember her name.

The sidewalks had begun to slick over by the time I reached the side street where, according to Fisk, Amelia had lived. I turned onto it and headed east, toward downtown.

I walked into a residential zone. The neighborhood was one of those isolated pockets of near-normal suburbia that had been swallowed by the metro area but still

existed with their identity, like islands in flood waters. Most, I suspected, would slowly be eaten by businesses over the years, but this street--Charles--probably stayed alive due to student support; housing on-campus was rare and the kids had to live somewhere.

The houses were big two-story constructions, the type with jutting brick porches and balconies. Many seemed to have been split up into doubles or triples, and all seemed to hold more occupants than legally allowed. Lights glowed from many windows; within, I could see silhouettes dancing or flailing or--in one interesting case--apparently having sex while leaning against the curtained window.

I checked the address, and then sauntered further up the block and turned left on Delaware Lane. The house I was looking for loomed up ahead of me, one lot back from the corner. It was two stories high, with brown siding and a cupola facing the street. A concrete porch edged out into the tiny strip of brown grass in front. Lights shone out of the upstairs windows, but yellowish-tan drapes obscured any of the possible sights within.

I walked up the drive. It was empty save for a small red VW bug with a cracked windshield that sat like a dead carcass upon the gravel. It smelled like burnt oil. I mounted a set of concrete steps leading up to the porch from the drive. An old, sprung couch sat on the porch; two empty bottles of Coors stuck out like weeds from between the rumpled, stained cushions. More bottles, lying on their sides, had rolled up against the porch rail. A darkened, curtained window occupied the wall above the couch.

I stood in front of the door, then knocked.

I waited perhaps ten seconds. From within I heard the thud of footsteps descending stairs. Light suddenly shone out through the window to my right.

"Yeah?" called a male voice through the door.

"Police," I told them.

"Shit," the man behind the door said.

I wondered briefly if this would be dangerous. I decided against it, hoping Fisk would have told me otherwise.

I heard the shuffling of feet, and then someone unlatched and opened the door. An unkempt young man of about twenty-five squinted out at me. He seemed to be newly-awakened or very, very stoned--his eyelids were thick and red. His long, greasy blonde hair floated around his head, as though he were suffering electric shock even as he looked at me. His chest was bare and thin. The only clothing he wore was a pair of plaid, baggy, knee-length shorts. As soon as he opened the door, the bittersweet odor of marijuana smoke and incense fled the house like a living thing.

"Lemme see a badge," he said. From deep inside the house I heard a toilet flushing. There went this week's stash.

"I was fooling," I said, pleasantly. "I'm not a policeman."

The kid squinted at me harder. "Shit," he said again, then paused and licked his lips. "This is about Amelia, right?"

Smart boy. Probably studied rocket science at the U. I grinned disarmingly.

"That's right. May I come in? It's cold."

He kept staring at me. Finally he wiped a hand across his face, sniffled, and then nodded. He swung open the door and shuffled inside, leaving me to follow.

"Place is a mess," he said.

I shut the door behind me and surveyed the room I'd entered. He told the truth: it was indeed a mess of monumental proportions. Clothing and veritable armloads of scattered papers, both of the school and news variety, had been seemingly flung up into the air and allowed to lie where they fell. A stack of at least twelve pizza boxes rocked precariously to my right, next to an old wooden staircase that rose up into a haze of smoke. A yellowed overhead light cast its weary glow upon the room; I couldn't tell if the glass was simply old or if the dust on the light was so thick it colored it regardless. A television, tuned to static, sat atop another, larger television. Before it, against the outside wall to my right, sat a brown couch in only slightly better condition than the one on the porch. A form of indiscriminate sex sprawled along its length, unconscious. An open beer can rested on the rounded arm of the couch above the figure's head; eight of its fellows stood on the carpeted floor beside an outstretched hand.

"That's John," said the boy who'd let me in. He stood across the room from me, leaning against the side of an archway that seemed to lead into a darkened kitchen. "He's sleeping, so we gotta be quiet."

"Right," I said, suspecting that nothing short of a fragmentation grenade would rouse John at this point. "Who are you?" I asked.

The boy sniffled again. Cocaine, maybe?

"Roger," he said. "Roger Abel. Who're you?"

"My name is Mr. Thompson," I said. "I was hired to find Amelia by her father."

"We already talked to one guy about this. Said the same thing--you know, ol' Rupert hired him and shit."

"Apparently," I said, "That guy couldn't find her. So ol' Rupert hired me."

"Yeah," the kid said. He shrugged. "I don't know where she is."

"Who would?"

"I don't know, man." Sniffle. From up the stairs, churning, bass-heavy metal music began to play. "We sure as hell don't."

"Who's we?"

"Huh?"

"How many of you live here?"

"Oh . . . uh, four, now 'Melia's gone."

"Who else besides you?"

"John," said Roger, pointing at the couch. "Tanya. Lee."

"I need last names."

"Shit, man, I can't give you their names without asking them first." He seemed offended, and his eyes found mine.

"You can and you will," I said. "Or I'll have you arrested for possession."

"Shit's gone, dude. We got rid of it."

"I can still have the cops come and toss this place. Do you want that?"

Roger considered this, then relented, glaring. "John Powell. Tanya Pamelhoff. Lee, uh . . . Lee Strong. And me."

"Were you all friends with Amelia?"

As Roger thought over the question, I heard new footsteps descending the stairs. I turned and saw a young woman dressed only in an oversized army jacket sit on the steps, three-quarters of the way up. She leaned her forehead against the railing and then stared at me through the space between the rounded wooden balusters. She was young and slight and had hair so black it had to have been dyed.

"We all knew her," she said, in a rasping voice. Her eyes were red and seemed to have trouble focusing. "She's a cool lady."

"She's missing," I said. "Her father wants to know where she is."

Roger snorted. "Rupert just wants her away from us, man," he said. "Thought we were a bad influence."

"Why would he ever think that?" I asked.

"Huh?"

I pressed on. "How long ago did Amelia leave this place?"

"Um . . . " Roger said.

"About six weeks," the girl on the stairs said. Her legs had spread slightly apart. She wasn't wearing underwear. I don't think she realized it. I kept my eyes on her face.

"Did she say she was leaving?" I asked.

"Nope," Roger informed me. "Up and left. Stuck us for her rent, too. We couldn't find another tenant." He managed to say "tenant" without any vowels.

"She have a boyfriend?" I asked.

"Me," Roger said. His eyes fastened on mine again. Just to show me he meant it.

"Any relatives she did like? That she might have gone to?"

"Nope. Hated all of 'em."

"Another guy?"

"Shit," Roger said, disdainfully.

"She have a job?" I asked.

"Got money from her dad," the girl said. "She had a Visa card."

"Who scores the dope around here?" I asked.

"Huh?" This was from both of them.

"Who gets your dope? The pot? Don't tell me you don't smoke it, either."

A pause. "I do," Roger said.

"Where?"

"Shit, man--"

I lost my patience in an eyeblink.

I moved forward and pinned Roger to the wall with my right hand. I brought my other hand up to eye level and let my growing annoyance go; I felt my guts twist and summon up fire. Its sudden searing heat tightened the skin upon my face, and I immediately began to sweat. Roger shrieked when he saw what I held in my hand:

a whirling cloud of flame and light. I gritted my teeth and let it grow hot; it glowed cherry-red from inside. Roger ceased to struggle, his eyes wide and fastened upon my hand and the miniature inferno I held there.

"Don't screw around, Roger," I said.

"Man--"

He whimpered. I wondered why I hadn't started out this way. It was easier than talking.

"Roger, look at me."

I was aware of the girl on the steps scuttling backwards, her thin legs kicking at the stairs.

Roger's eyes fluttered to mine. He looked considerably more sober.

"I want to find Amelia. Do you know where she is?"

"N-no, man--"

"You bought her drugs?"

"No."

"You just said you did."

"I do now, but--"

"But what?"

"But Am-Amelia used to buy for us. When she was here, I mean--"

"What kinds?"

"Man, everything, she was a fucking dopehead--"

"Cocaine?" I asked.



"Uh-huh."

"Heroin?"

"Once or twice."

"From whom?"

"She bought the c-coke from a guy named Leo up the street. He's small time. The horse she scored up at the Slipper." Roger's lower lip began to pucker and tremble. His already bleary eyes filled with glistening tears. I could see my firelight reflecting back at me from his pinpoint pupils.

"The Glass Slipper?"

"Yuh-yeah--"

"From?"

"Man named Andre. I don't know his last name, she never told me--"

"Good enough."

I let him go. Simultaneously, I whipped my hand down to my side and let the fire extinguish itself. I took a breath as the energy crackled through me, dispelling itself, and then it was gone.

Roger let out a moan and sank to the carpet.

I barely glanced at him. I had information now--more than the PI had gotten, anyway. Roger and his friend knew nothing more than what they'd told me. They hadn't lied. Amelia had walked out on them--or had been taken, but I wasn't as sure.

But I always check drugs. Drugs mean danger, especially heroin. I had to

check out this man Andre, and see if perhaps he knew anything about Amelia Fisk.

"Good night," I said. "Forget I was here."

Roger shrank away from me, trying to sink into the wall for protection. The girl was long gone, probably cowering upstairs somewhere. I felt bad for a minute, but I shook it off. A job was a job. They'd pass it off as a hallucination in the morning, if they knew what was good for them.

It was the same situation Jimmy Delane was in--who could they tell? Who'd believe them?

I opened the door and walked out onto the porch. The cold bit at me immediately, sidling through the gaps in my clothing.

I shoved my hands in my pockets and summoned warm light to them. I closed my fists around the glow and then walked back to the street, and from there to the Glass Slipper.

Of course, I had scared them nearly to death. Someday I'd run into someone with a weak heart and do serious damage.

I frowned and buried my chin into my collar. I walked briskly and tried not to think about it at all.